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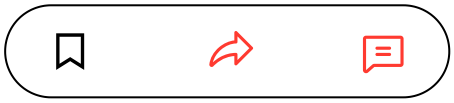
# The Falling Man

An unforgettable story.

By Tom Junod PUBLISHED: SEP 9, 2021



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RICHARD DREW/AP

*Do you remember this photograph? In the United States, people have taken pains to banish it from the record of September 11, 2001. The story*

*behind it, though, and the search for the man pictured in it, are our most intimate connection to the horror of that day.*

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**In the picture,** he departs from this earth like an arrow. Although he has not chosen his fate, he appears to have, in his last instants of life, embraced it. If he were not falling, he might very well be flying. He appears relaxed, hurtling through the air. He appears comfortable in the grip of unimaginable motion. He does not appear intimidated by gravity's divine suction or by what awaits him. His arms are by his side, only slightly outriggered. His left leg is bent at the knee, almost casually. His white shirt, or jacket, or frock, is billowing free of his black pants. His black high-tops are still on his feet. In all the other pictures, the people who did what he did—who jumped—appear to be struggling against horrific discrepancies of scale. They are made puny by the backdrop of the towers, which loom like colossi, and then by the event itself. Some of them are shirtless; their shoes fly off as they flail and fall; they look confused, as though trying to swim down the side of a mountain. The man in the picture, by contrast, is perfectly vertical, and so is in accord with the lines of the buildings behind him. He splits them, bisects them: Everything to the left of him in the picture is the North Tower; everything to the right, the South. Though oblivious to the geometric balance he has achieved, he is the essential element in the creation of a new flag, a banner composed entirely of steel bars shining in the sun. Some people who look at the picture see stoicism, willpower, a portrait of resignation; others see something else—something discordant and therefore terrible: freedom. There is something almost rebellious in the man's posture, as though once faced with the inevitability of death, he decided to get on with it; as though he were a missile, a spear, bent on attaining his own end. He is, fifteen

seconds past 9:41 a.m. EST, the moment the picture is taken, in the clutches of pure physics, accelerating at a rate of thirty-two feet per second squared. He will soon be traveling at upwards of 150 miles per hour, and he is upside down. In the picture, he is frozen; in his life outside the frame, he drops and keeps dropping until he disappears.

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AP

**The photographer** is no stranger to history; he knows it is something that happens later. In the actual moment history is made, it is usually made in terror and confusion, and so it is up to people like him—paid witnesses—to have the presence of mind to attend to its manufacture. The photographer has that presence of mind

and has had it since he was a young man. When he was twenty-one years old, he was standing right behind Bobby Kennedy when Bobby Kennedy was shot in the head. His jacket was spattered with Kennedy's blood, but he jumped on a table and shot pictures of Kennedy's open and ebbing eyes, and then of Ethel Kennedy crouching over her husband and begging photographers—begging him—not to take pictures.

Richard Drew has never done that. Although he has preserved the jacket patterned with Kennedy's blood, he has never not taken a picture, never averted his eye. He works for the Associated Press. He is a journalist. It is not up to him to reject the images that fill his frame, because one never knows when history is made until one makes it. It is not even up to him to distinguish if a body is alive or dead, because the camera makes no such distinctions, and he is in the business of shooting bodies, as all photographers are, unless they are Ansel Adams. Indeed, he was shooting bodies on the morning of September 11, 2001. On assignment for the AP, he was shooting a maternity fashion show in Bryant Park, notable, he says, "because it featured actual pregnant models." He was fifty-four years old. He wore glasses. He was sparse in the scalp, gray in the beard, hard in the head. In a lifetime of taking pictures, he has found a way to be both mild-mannered and brusque, patient and very, very quick. He was doing what he always does at fashion shows—"staking out real estate"—when a CNN cameraman with an earpiece said that a plane had crashed into the North Tower, and Drew's editor rang his cell phone. He packed his equipment into a bag and gambled on taking the subway downtown. Although it was still running, he was the only one on it. He got out at the Chambers Street station and saw that both towers had been turned into smokestacks. Staking out his real estate, he walked west, to where ambulances were

gathering, because rescue workers "usually won't throw you out." Then he heard people gasping. People on the ground were gasping because people in the building were jumping. He started shooting pictures through a 200mm lens. He was standing between a cop and an emergency technician, and each time one of them cried, "There goes another," his camera found a falling body and followed it down for a nine- or twelve-shot sequence. He shot ten or fifteen of them before he heard the rumbling of the South Tower and witnessed, through the winnowing exclusivity of his lens, its collapse. He was engulfed in a mobile ruin, but he grabbed a mask from an ambulance and photographed the top of the North Tower "exploding like a mushroom" and raining debris. He discovered that there is such a thing as being too close, and, deciding that he had fulfilled his professional obligations, Richard Drew joined the throng of ashen humanity heading north, walking until he reached his office at Rockefeller Center.

**There is something almost rebellious in the man's posture, as though once faced with the inevitability of death, he decided to get on with it.**

There was no terror or confusion at the Associated Press. There was, instead, that feeling of history being manufactured; although the office was as crowded as he'd ever seen it, there was, instead, "the wonderful calm that comes into play when people are really doing their jobs." So Drew did his: He inserted the disc from his digital camera into his laptop and recognized, instantly, what only his camera had seen—

something iconic in the extended annihilation of a falling man. He didn't look at any of the other pictures in the sequence; he didn't have to. "You learn in photo editing to look for the frame," he says. "You have to recognize it. That picture just jumped off the screen because of its verticality and symmetry. It just had that look."

He sent the image to the AP's server. The next morning, it appeared on page seven of *The New York Times*. It appeared in hundreds of newspapers, all over the country, all over the world. The man inside the frame—the Falling Man—was not identified.

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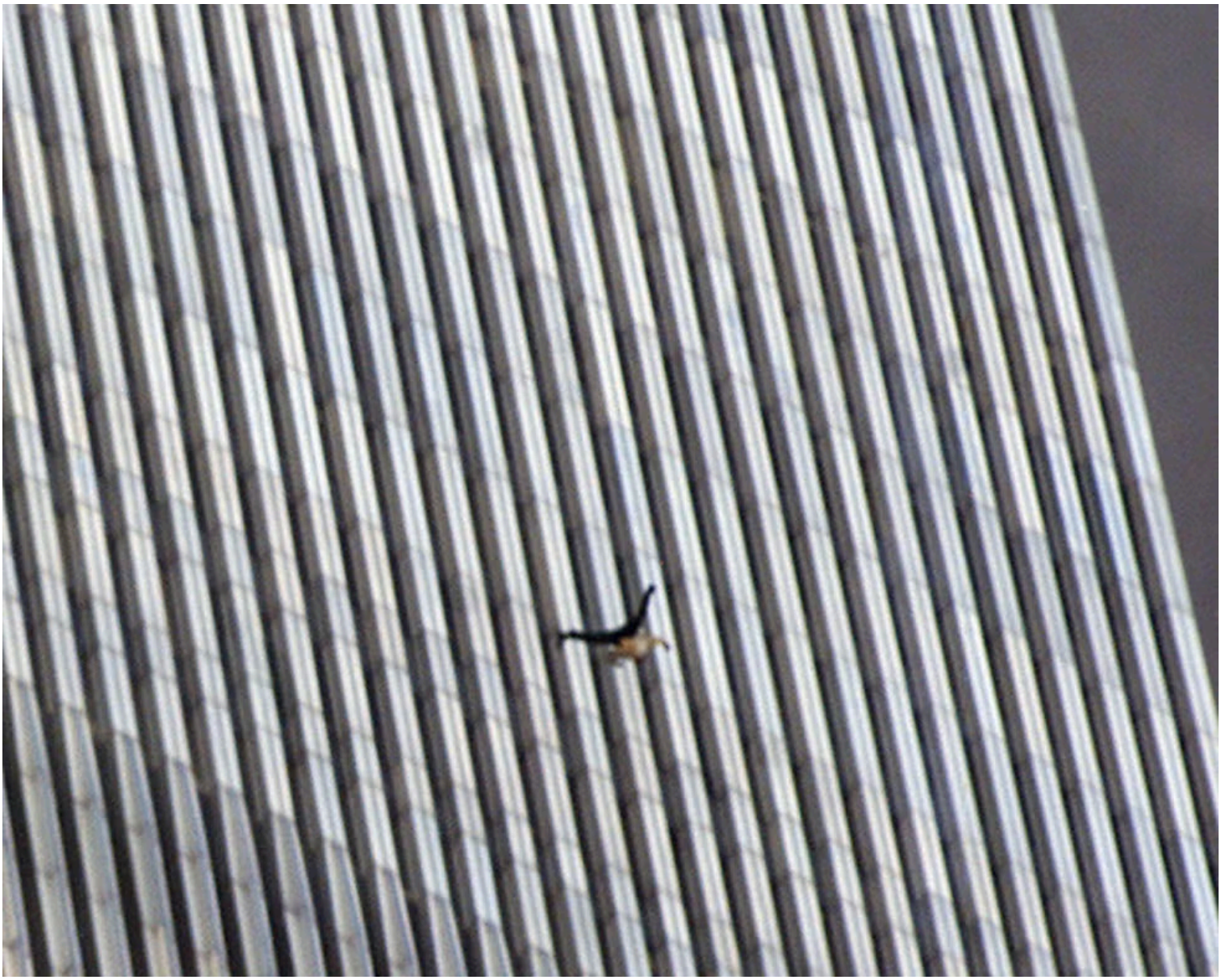
AP

**They began jumping** not long after the first plane hit the North Tower, not long after the fire started. They kept jumping until the tower fell. They jumped through windows already broken and then, later, through windows they broke themselves. They jumped to escape the smoke and the fire; they jumped when the ceilings fell and the floors collapsed; they jumped just to breathe once more before they died. They jumped continually, from all four sides of the building, and from all floors above and around the building's fatal wound. They jumped from the offices of Marsh & McLennan, the insurance company; from the offices of Cantor Fitzgerald, the bond-trading company; from Windows on the World, the restaurant on the 106th and 107th floors—the top. For more than an hour and a half, they *streamed* from the building, one after another, consecutively rather than en masse, as if each individual required the sight of another individual jumping before mustering the courage to jump himself or herself. One photograph, taken at a distance, shows people jumping in perfect sequence, like parachutists, forming an arc composed of three plummeting people, evenly spaced. Indeed, there were reports that some tried parachuting, before the force generated by their fall ripped the drapes, the tablecloths, the desperately gathered fabric, from their hands. They were all, obviously, very much alive on their way down, and their way down lasted an approximate count of ten seconds. They were all, obviously, not just killed when they landed but destroyed, in body though not, one prays, in soul. One hit a fireman on the ground and killed him; the fireman's body was anointed by Father Mychal Judge, whose own death, shortly thereafter, was embraced as an example of martyrdom after the photograph—the redemptive tableau—of firefighters carrying his body from the rubble made its way around the world.

# They began jumping not long after the first plane hit the North Tower, not long after the fire started. They kept jumping until the tower fell.

From the beginning, the spectacle of doomed people jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center resisted redemption. They were called "jumpers" or "the jumpers," as though they represented a new lemminglike class. The trial that hundreds endured in the building and then in the air became its own kind of trial for the thousands watching them from the ground. No one ever got used to it; no one who saw it wished to see it again, although, of course, many saw it again. Each jumper, no matter how many there were, brought fresh horror, elicited shock, tested the spirit, struck a lasting blow. Those tumbling through the air remained, by all accounts, eerily silent; those on the ground screamed. It was the sight of the jumpers that prompted Rudy Giuliani to say to his police commissioner, "We're in uncharted waters now." It was the sight of the jumpers that prompted a woman to wail, "God! Save their souls! They're jumping! Oh, please God! Save their souls!" And it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was "like a movie," for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable: Americans responding to the worst terrorist attack in the history of the world with acts of heroism, with acts of sacrifice, with acts of generosity, with acts of martyrdom, and, by terrible necessity, with one prolonged act of—if these words can be applied to mass murder—mass suicide.



AP

**In most American Newspapers**, the photograph that Richard Drew took of the Falling Man ran once and never again. Papers all over the country, from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* to the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* to *The Denver Post*, were forced to defend themselves against charges that they exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, invaded his privacy, turned tragedy into leering pornography. Most letters of complaint stated the obvious: that *someone* seeing the picture had to know who it was. Still, even as Drew's photograph became at once iconic and impermissible, its subject remained unnamed. An editor at the Toronto *Globe and Mail* assigned a reporter named Peter Cheney to solve the mystery. Cheney at first despaired of his task; the entire city, after all, was wallpapered with

Kinkoed flyers advertising the faces of the missing and the lost and the dead. Then he applied himself, sending the digital photograph to a shop that clarified and enhanced it. Now information emerged: It appeared to him that the man was most likely not black but dark-skinned, probably Latino. He wore a goatee. And the white shirt billowing from his black pants was not a shirt but rather appeared to be a tunic of some sort, the kind of jacket a restaurant worker wears. Windows on the World, the restaurant at the top of the North Tower, lost seventy-nine of its employees on September 11, as well as ninety-one of its patrons. It was likely that the Falling Man numbered among them. But which one was he? Over dinner, Cheney spent an evening discussing this question with friends, then said goodnight and walked through Times Square. It was after midnight, eight days after the attacks. The missing posters were still everywhere, but Cheney was able to focus on one that seemed to present itself to him—a poster portraying a man who worked at Windows as a pastry chef, who was dressed in a white tunic, who wore a goatee, who was Latino. His name was Norberto Hernandez. He lived in Queens. Cheney took the enhanced print of the Richard Drew photograph to the family, in particular to Norberto Hernandez's brother Tino and sister Milagros. They said yes, that was Norberto. Milagros had watched footage of the people jumping on that terrible morning, before the television stations stopped showing it. She had seen one of the jumpers distinguished by the grace of his fall—by his resemblance to an Olympic diver—and surmised that he had to be her brother. Now she saw, and she knew. All that remained was for Peter Cheney to confirm the identification with Norberto's wife and his three daughters. They did not want to talk to him, especially after Norberto's remains were found and identified by the stamp of his DNA—a torso, an arm. So he went to the funeral. He brought his print of Drew's photograph with him and showed it to Jacqueline Hernandez, the oldest of Norberto's

three daughters. She looked briefly at the picture, then at Cheney, and ordered him to leave.

What Cheney remembers her saying, in her anger, in her offended grief: "That piece of shit is not my father."

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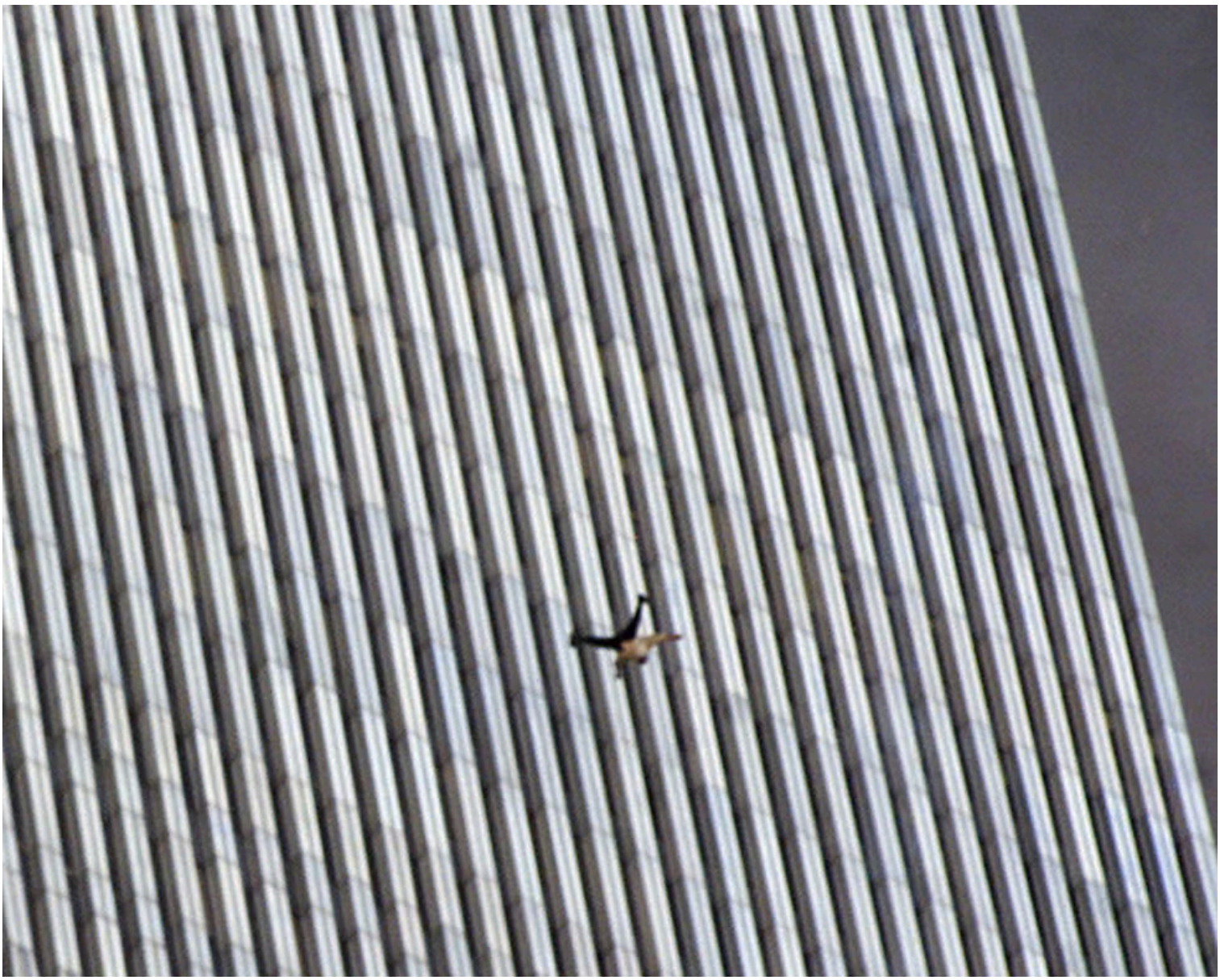

AP

**The resistance to the image**—to the images—started early, started immediately, started on the ground. A mother whispering to her distraught child a consoling lie: "Maybe they're just birds, honey." Bill Feehan, second in command at the fire department, chasing a bystander who was panning the jumpers with his

video camera, demanding that he turn it off, bellowing, "Don't you have any human decency?" before dying himself when the building came down. In the most photographed and videotaped day in the history of the world, the images of people jumping were the only images that became, by consensus, taboo—the only images from which Americans were proud to avert their eyes. All over the world, people saw the human stream debouch from the top of the North Tower, but here in the United States, we saw these images only until the networks decided not to allow such a harrowing view, out of respect for the families of those so publicly dying. At CNN, the footage was shown live, before people working in the newsroom knew what was happening; then, after what Walter Isaacson, who was then chairman of the network's news bureau, calls "agonized discussions" with the "standards guy," it was shown only if people in it were blurred and unidentifiable; then it was not shown at all.

And so it went. In *9/11*, the documentary extracted from videotape shot by French brothers Jules and Gedeon Naudet, the filmmakers included a sonic sampling of the booming, rattling explosions the jumpers made upon impact but edited out the most disturbing thing about the sounds: the sheer frequency with which they occurred. In *Rudy*, the docudrama starring James Woods in the role of Mayor Giuliani, archival footage of the jumpers was first included, then cut out. In *Here Is New York*, an extensive exhibition of 9/11 images culled from the work of photographers both amateur and professional, there was, in the section titled "Victims," but one picture of the jumpers, taken at a respectful distance; attached to it, on the Here Is New York Web site, a visitor offers this commentary: "This image is what made me glad for censuring [*sic*] in the endless pursuant media coverage." More and more, the jumpers—and their images—were relegated to the Internet

underbelly, where they became the provenance of the shock sites that also traffic in the autopsy photos of Nicole Brown Simpson and the videotape of Daniel Pearl's execution, and where it is impossible to look at them without attendant feelings of shame and guilt. In a nation of voyeurs, the desire to face the most disturbing aspects of our most disturbing day was somehow ascribed to voyeurism, as though the jumpers' experience, instead of being central to the horror, was tangential to it, a sideshow best forgotten.

It was no sideshow. The two most reputable estimates of the number of people who jumped to their deaths were prepared by *The New York Times* and *USA Today*. They differed dramatically. The *Times*, admittedly conservative, decided to count only what its reporters actually saw in the footage they collected, and it arrived at a figure of fifty. *USA Today*, whose editors used eyewitness accounts and forensic evidence in addition to what they found on video, came to the conclusion that at least two hundred people died by jumping—a count that the newspaper said authorities did not dispute. Both are intolerable estimates of human loss, but if the number provided by *USA Today* is accurate, then between 7 and 8 percent of those who died in New York City on September 11, 2001, died by jumping out of the buildings; it means that if we consider only the North Tower, where the vast majority of jumpers came from, the ratio is more like one in six.

**From the beginning, the spectacle of doomed people jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center resisted redemption.**

And yet if one calls the New York Medical Examiner's Office to learn its own estimate of how many people might have jumped, one does not get an answer but an admonition: "We don't like to say they jumped. They didn't jump. Nobody jumped. They were forced out, or blown out." And if one Googles the words "how many jumped on 9/11," one falls into some blogger's trap, slugged "Go Away, No Jumpers Here," where the bait is one's own need to know: "I've got at least three entries in my referrer logs that show someone is doing a search on Google for 'how many people jumped from WTC.' My September 11 post had made mention of that terrible occurance [*sic*], so now any pervert looking for that will get my site's URL. I'm disgusted. I tried, but cannot find any reason someone would want to know something like that.... Whatever. If that's why you're here—you're busted. Now go away."

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AP

**Eric Fischl did not go away**. Neither did he turn away or avert his eyes. A year before September 11, he had taken photographs of a model tumbling around on the floor of a studio. He had thought of using the photographs as the basis of a sculpture. Now, though, he had lost a friend who had been trapped on the 106th floor of the North Tower. Now, as he worked on his sculpture, he sought to express the extremity of his feelings by making a monument to what he calls the "extremity of choice" faced by the people who jumped. He worked nine months on the larger-than-life bronze he called *Tumbling Woman*, and as he transformed a woman tumbling on the floor into a woman tumbling through eternity, he succeeded in transfiguring the very local horror of the jumpers into

something universal—in redeeming an image many regarded as irredeemable. Indeed, *Tumbling Woman* was perhaps *the* redemptive image of 9/11—and yet it was not merely resisted; it was rejected. The day after Tumbling Woman was exhibited in New York's Rockefeller Center, Andrea Peyser of the *New York Post* denounced it in a column titled "Shameful Art Attack," in which she argued that Fischl had no right to ambush grieving New Yorkers with the very distillation of their own sadness ... in which she essentially argued the right to look away. Because it was based on a model rolling on the floor, the statue was treated as an evocation of impact—as a portrayal of literal, rather than figurative, violence.

"I was trying to say something about the way we all feel," Fischl says, "but people thought I was trying to say something about the way *they* feel—that I was trying to take away something only they possessed. They thought that I was trying to say something about the people they lost. 'That image is not my father. You don't even know my father. How dare you try telling me how I feel about my father?'" Fischl wound up apologizing—"I was ashamed to have added to anybody's pain"—but it didn't matter.

Jerry Speyer, a trustee of the Museum of Modern Art who runs Rockefeller Center, ended the exhibition of *Tumbling Woman* after a week. "I pleaded with him not to do it," Fischl says. "I thought that if we could wait it out, other voices would pipe up and carry the day. He said, 'You don't understand. I'm getting bomb threats.' I said, 'People who just lost loved ones to terrorism are not going to bomb somebody.' He said, 'I can't take that chance.'"

AP

**Photographs lie.** Even great photographs. Especially great photographs. The Falling Man in Richard Drew's picture fell in the manner suggested by the photograph for only a fraction of a second, and then kept falling. The photograph functioned as a study of doomed verticality, a fantasia of straight lines, with a human being slivered at the center, like a spike. In truth, however, the Falling Man fell with neither the precision of an arrow nor the grace of an Olympic diver. He fell like everyone else, like all the other jumpers—trying to hold on to the life he was leaving, which is to say that he fell desperately, inelegantly. In Drew's famous photograph, his humanity is in accord with the lines of the buildings. In the rest of the sequence—the eleven outtakes—his humanity stands apart. He is not augmented by

aesthetics; he is merely human, and his humanity, startled and in some cases horizontal, obliterates everything else in the frame.

In the complete sequence of photographs, truth is subordinate to the facts that emerge slowly, pitilessly, frame by frame. In the sequence, the Falling Man shows his face to the camera in the two frames before the published one, and after that there is an unveiling, nearly an unpeeling, as the force generated by the fall rips the white jacket off his back. The facts that emerge from the entire sequence suggest that the Toronto reporter, Peter Cheney, got some things right in his effort to solve the mystery presented by Drew's published photo. The Falling Man has a dark cast to his skin and wears a goatee. He is probably a food-service worker. He seems lanky, with the length and narrowness of his face—like that of a medieval Christ—possibly accentuated by the push of the wind and the pull of gravity. But seventy-nine people died on the morning of September 11 after going to work at Windows on the World. Another twenty-one died while in the employ of Forte Food, a catering service that fed the traders at Cantor Fitzgerald. Many of the dead were Latino, or light-skinned black men, or Indian, or Arab. Many had dark hair cut short. Many had mustaches and goatees. Indeed, to anyone trying to figure out the identity of the Falling Man, the few salient characteristics that can be discerned in the original series of photographs raise as many possibilities as they exclude. There is, however, one fact that is decisive. Whoever the Falling Man may be, he was wearing a bright-orange shirt under his white top. It is the one inarguable fact that the brute force of the fall reveals. No one can know if the tunic or shirt, open at the back, is being pulled away from him, or if the fall is simply tearing the white fabric to pieces. But anyone can see he is wearing an orange shirt. If they saw these pictures, members of his family would be able to see that he is wearing an orange shirt.

They might even be able to remember if he owned an orange shirt, if he was the kind of guy who *would* own an orange shirt, if he wore an orange shirt to work that morning. Surely they would; surely *someone* would remember what he was wearing when he went to work on the last morning of his life.....

But now the Falling Man is falling through more than the blank blue sky. He is falling through the vast spaces of memory and picking up speed.

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AP

**eil Levin, Executive Director** of the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey, had breakfast at Windows on the World, on the 106th floor

N of the World Trade Center's North Tower, on the morning of September 11. He never came home. His wife, Christy Ferer, won't talk about any of the particulars of his death. She works for New York mayor Mike Bloomberg as the liaison between the mayor's office and the 9/11 families and has poured the energy aroused by her grief into her work, which, before the first anniversary of the attack, called for her to visit television executives and ask them not to use the most disturbing footage—including the footage of the jumpers—in their memorial broadcasts. She is a close friend of Eric Fischl's, as was her husband, so when the artist asked, she agreed to take a look at *Tumbling Woman*. It, in her words, "hit me in the gut," but she felt that Fischl had the right to create and exhibit it. Now she's come to the conclusion that the controversy may have been largely a matter of timing. Maybe it was just too soon to show something like that. After all, not long before her husband died, she traveled with him to Auschwitz, where piles of confiscated eyeglasses and extracted tooth fillings are on exhibit. "They can show that now," she says. "But that was a long time ago. They couldn't show things like that *then*...."

In fact, they did, at least in photographic form, and the pictures that came out of the death camps of Europe were treated as essential acts of witness, without particular regard to the sensitivities of those who appeared in them or the surviving families of the dead. They were shown, as Richard Drew's photographs of the freshly assassinated Robert Kennedy were shown. They were shown, as the photographs of Ethel Kennedy pleading with photographers not to take photographs were shown. They were shown as the photograph of the little Vietnamese girl running naked after a napalm attack was shown. They were shown as the photograph of Father Mychal Judge, graphically and unmistakably dead, was shown, and accepted as a kind of testament.

They were shown as everything is shown, for, like the lens of a camera, history is a force that does not discriminate. What distinguishes the pictures of the jumpers from the pictures that have come before is that we—we Americans—are being asked to discriminate on their behalf. What distinguishes them, historically, is that we, as patriotic Americans, have agreed not to look at them. Dozens, scores, maybe hundreds of people died by leaping from a burning building, and we have somehow taken it upon ourselves to deem their deaths unworthy of witness—because we have somehow deemed the act of witness, in this one regard, unworthy of us.

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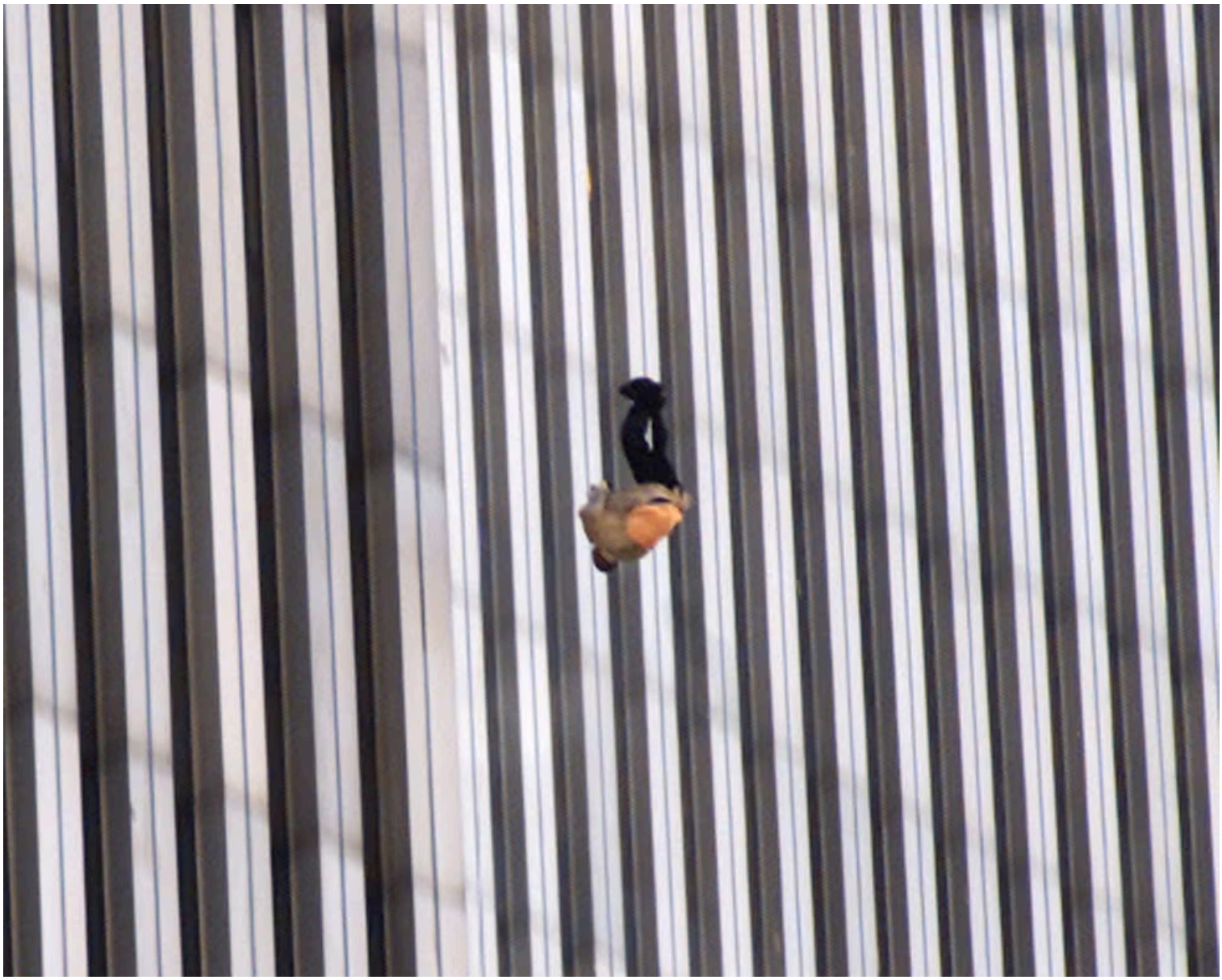

AP

**Catherine Hernandez** never saw the photo the reporter carried under his arm at her father's funeral. Neither did her mother, Eulogia. Her sister Jacqueline did, and her outrage assured that the reporter left—was forcibly evicted—before he did any more damage. But the picture has followed Catherine and Eulogia and the entire Hernandez family. There was nothing more important to Norberto Hernandez than family. His motto: "Together Forever." But the Hernandezes are not together anymore. The picture split them. Those who *knew*, right away, that the picture was not Norberto—his wife and his daughters—have become estranged from those who pondered the possibility that it was him for the benefit of a reporter's notepad. With Norberto alive, the extended family all lived in the same neighborhood in Queens. Now Eulogia and her daughters have moved to a house on Long Island because Tatiana—who is now sixteen and who bears a resemblance to Norberto Hernandez: the wide face, the dark brows, the thick dark lips, thinly smiling—kept seeing visions of her father in the house and kept hearing the whispered suggestions that he died by jumping out a window.

*He could not have died by jumping out a window.*

All over the world, people who read Peter Cheney's story believe that Norberto died by jumping out a window. People have written poems about Norberto jumping out a window. People have called the Hernandezes with offers of money—either charity or payment for interviews—because they read about Norberto jumping out a window. But he couldn't have jumped out a window, his family knows, because he *wouldn't* have jumped out a window: not Papi. "He was trying to come home," Catherine says one morning, in a living room primarily decorated with framed photographs of her father. "He was trying to

come home to us, and he knew he wasn't going to make it by jumping out a window." She is a lovely, dark-skinned, brown-eyed girl, twenty-two years old, dressed in a T-shirt and sweats and sandals. She is sitting on a couch next to her mother, who is caramel-colored, with coppery hair tied close to her scalp, and who is wearing a cotton dress checked with the color of the sky. Eulogia speaks half the time in determined English, and then, when she gets frustrated with the rate of revelation, pours rapid-fire Spanish into the ear of her daughter, who translates. "My mother says she knows that when he died, he was thinking about us. She says that she could see him thinking about us. I know that sounds strange, but she *knew* him. They were together since they were fifteen." The Norberto Hernandez Eulogia knew would not have been deterred by smoke or by fire in his effort to come home to her. The Norberto Hernandez she knew would have endured any pain before he jumped out of a window. When the Norberto Hernandez she knew died, his eyes were fixed on what he saw in his heart—the faces of his wife and his daughters—and not on the terrible beauty of an empty sky.

How well did she know him? "I *dressed* him," Eulogia says in English, a smile appearing on her face at the same time as a shiny coat of tears. "Every morning. That morning, I remember. He wore Old Navy underwear. Green. He wore black socks. He wore blue pants: jeans. He wore a Casio watch. He wore an Old Navy shirt. Blue. With checks." What did he wear after she drove him, as she always did, to the subway station and watched him wave to her as he disappeared down the stairs? "He changed clothes at the restaurant," says Catherine, who worked with her father at Windows on the World. "He was a pastry chef, so he wore white pants, or chef's pants—you know, black-and-white check. He wore a white jacket. Under that, he had to wear a white

T-shirt." What about an orange shirt? "No," Eulogia says. "My husband did not have an orange shirt."

**But now the Falling Man is falling through more than the blank blue sky. He is falling through the vast spaces of memory and picking up speed.**

There are pictures. There are pictures of the Falling Man as he fell. Do they want to see them? Catherine says no, on her mother's behalf—"My mother should not see"—but then, when she steps outside and sits down on the steps of the front porch, she says, "Please—show me. Hurry. Before my mother comes." When she sees the twelve-frame sequence, she lets out a gasping, muted call for her mother, but Eulogia is already over her shoulder, reaching for the pictures. She looks at them one after another, and then her face fixes itself into an expression of triumph and scorn. "That is not my husband," she says, handing the photographs back. "You see? Only I know Norberto." She reaches for the photographs again, and then, after studying them, shakes her head with a vehement finality. "The man in this picture is a black man." She asks for copies of the pictures so that she can show them to the people who believed that Norberto jumped out a window, while Catherine sits on the step with her palm spread over her heart. "They said my father was going to hell because he jumped," she says. "On the Internet. They said my father was taken to hell with the devil. I don't know what I would have done if it was him. I would have had a nervous breakdown, I guess. They would have found me in a mental ward somewhere...."

Her mother is standing at the front door, about to go back inside her house. Her face has already lost its belligerent pride and has turned once again into a mask of composed, almost wistful sadness. "Please," she says as she closes the door in a stain of morning sunlight. "Please clear my husband's name."

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AP

A **phone rings** in Connecticut. A woman answers. A man on the other end is looking to identify a photo that ran in *The New York Times* on September 12, 2001. "Tell me what the photo looks like," she says. It's a famous picture, the man says—the famous picture of a man falling. "Is it the one called 'Swan Dive' on Rotten.com?"

the woman asks. It may be, the man says. "Yes, that might have been my son," the woman says.

She lost both her sons on September 11. They worked together at Cantor Fitzgerald. They worked on the equities desk. They worked back-to-back. No, the man on the phone says, the man in the photograph is probably a food-service worker. He's wearing a white jacket. He's upside down. "Then that's not my son," she says. "My son was wearing a dark shirt and khaki pants."

She knows what he was wearing because of her determination to know what happened to her sons on that day—because of her determination to look and to see. She did not start with that determination. She stopped reading the newspaper after September 11, stopped watching TV. Then, on New Year's Eve, she picked up a copy of *The New York Times* and saw, in a year-end review, a picture of Cantor Fitzgerald employees crowding the edge of the cliff formed by a dying building. In the posture—the attitude—of one of them, she thought she recognized the habits of her son. So she called the photographer and asked him to enlarge and clarify the picture. Demanded that he do it. And then she knew, or knew as much as it was possible to know. Both of her sons were in the picture. One was standing in the window, almost brazenly. The other was sitting inside. She does not need to say what may have happened next.

**Photographs lie. Even great photographs. Especially great photographs.**

"The thing I hold was that both of my sons were together," she says, her instantaneous tears lifting her voice an octave. "But I sometimes wonder how long they knew. They're puzzled, they're uncertain, they're scared—but when did they *know*? When did the moment come when they lost hope? Maybe it came so quick…."

The man on the phone does not ask if she thinks her sons jumped. He does not have it in him, and anyway, she has given him an answer.

The Hernandezes looked at the decision to jump as a betrayal of love—as something Norberto was being accused of. The woman in Connecticut looks at the decision to jump as a loss of hope—as an absence that we, the living, now have to live with. She chooses to live with it by looking, by seeing, by trying to know—by making an act of private witness. She could have chosen to keep her eyes closed. And so now the man on the phone asks the question that he called to ask in the first place: Did she make the right choice?

"I made the only choice I could have made," the woman answers. "I could never have made the choice not to know."

AP

**Catherine Hernandez** thought she knew who the Falling Man was as soon as she saw the series of pictures, but she wouldn't say his name. "He had a sister who was with him that morning," she said, "and he told his mother that he would take care of her. He would never have left her alone by jumping." She did say, however, that the man was Indian, so it was easy to figure out that his name was Sean Singh. But Sean was too small to be the Falling Man. He was clean-shaven. He worked at Windows on the World in the audiovisual department, so he probably would have been wearing a shirt and tie instead of a white chef's coat. None of the former Windows employees who were interviewed believe the Falling Man looks anything like Sean Singh.

Besides, he had a sister. He never would have left her alone.

A manager at Windows looked at the pictures once and said the Falling Man was Wilder Gomez. Then a few days later he studied them closely and changed his mind. Wrong hair. Wrong clothes. Wrong body type. It was the same with Charlie Mauro. It was the same with Junior Jimenez. Junior worked in the kitchen and would have been wearing checked pants. Charlie worked in purchasing and had no cause to wear a white jacket. Besides, Charlie was a very large man. The Falling Man appears fairly stout in Richard Drew's published photo but almost elongated in the rest of the sequence.

The rest of the kitchen workers were, like Norberto Hernandez, eliminated from consideration by their outfits. The banquet servers may have been wearing white and black, but no one remembered any banquet server who looked anything like the Falling Man.

Forte Food was the other food-service company that lost people on September 11, 2001. But all of its male employees worked in the kitchen, which means that they wore either checked or white pants. And nobody would have been allowed to wear an orange shirt under the white serving coat.

But someone who used to work for Forte remembers a guy who used to come around and get food for the Cantor executives. Black guy. Tall, with a mustache and a goatee. Wore a chef's coat, open, with a loud shirt underneath.

Nobody at Cantor remembers anyone like that.

Of course, the only way to find out the identity of the Falling Man is to call the families of anyone who might be the Falling Man and ask what

they know about their son's or husband's or father's last day on earth. Ask if he went to work wearing an orange shirt.

But should those calls be made? Should those questions be asked? Would they only heap pain upon the already anguished? Would they be regarded as an insult to the memory of the dead, the way the Hernandez family regarded the imputation that Norberto Hernandez was the Falling Man? Or would they be regarded as steps to some act of redemptive witness?

## "I made the only choice I could have made. I could never have made the choice not to know."

Jonathan Briley worked at Windows on the World. Some of his coworkers, when they saw Richard Drew's photographs, thought he might be the Falling Man. He was a light-skinned black man. He was over six five. He was forty-three. He had a mustache and a goatee and close-cropped hair. He had a wife named Hillary.

Jonathan Briley's father is a preacher, a man who has devoted his whole life to serving the Lord. After September 11, he gathered his family together to ask God to tell him where his son was. No: He demanded it. He used these words: "Lord, I demand to know where my son is." For three hours straight, he prayed in his deep voice, until he spent the grace he had accumulated over a lifetime in the insistence of his appeal.

The next day, the FBI called. They'd found his son's body. It was, miraculously, intact.

The preacher's youngest son, Timothy, went to identify his brother. He recognized him by his shoes: He was wearing black high-tops. Timothy removed one of them and took it home and put it in his garage, as a kind of memorial.

Timothy knew all about the Falling Man. He is a cop in Mount Vernon, New York, and in the week after his brother died, someone had left a September 12 newspaper open in the locker room. He saw the photograph of the Falling Man and, in anger, he refused to look at it again. But he couldn't throw it away. Instead, he stuffed it in the bottom of his locker, where—like the black shoe in his garage—it became permanent.

Jonathan's sister Gwendolyn knew about the Falling Man, too. She saw the picture the day it was published. She knew that Jonathan had asthma, and in the smoke and the heat would have done anything just to breathe....

The both of them, Timothy and Gwendolyn, knew what Jonathan wore to work on most days. He wore a white shirt and black pants, along with the high-top black shoes. Timothy also knew what Jonathan sometimes wore *under* his shirt: an orange T-shirt. Jonathan wore that orange T-shirt everywhere. He wore that shirt all the time. He wore it so often that Timothy used to make fun of him: When are you gonna get rid of that orange T-shirt, Slim?

But when Timothy identified his brother's body, none of his clothes were recognizable except the black shoes. And when Jonathan went to work on the morning of September 11, 2001, he'd left early and kissed

his wife goodbye while she was still sleeping. She never saw the clothes he was wearing. After she learned that he was dead, she packed his clothes away and never inventoried what specific articles of clothing might be missing.

Is Jonathan Briley the Falling Man? He might be. But maybe he didn't jump from the window as a betrayal of love or because he lost hope. Maybe he jumped to fulfill the terms of a miracle. Maybe he jumped to come home to his family. Maybe he didn't jump at all, because no one can jump into the arms of God.

Oh, no. You have to fall.

Yes, Jonathan Briley might be the Falling Man. But the only certainty we have is the certainty we had at the start: At fifteen seconds after 9:41 a.m., on September 11, 2001, a photographer named Richard Drew took a picture of a man falling through the sky—falling through time as well as through space. The picture went all around the world, and then disappeared, as if we willed it away. One of the most famous photographs in human history became an unmarked grave, and the man buried inside its frame—the Falling Man—became the Unknown Soldier in a war whose end we have not yet seen. Richard Drew's photograph is all we know of him, and yet all we know of him becomes a measure of what we know of ourselves. The picture is his cenotaph, and like the monuments dedicated to the memory of unknown soldiers everywhere, it asks that we look at it, and make one simple acknowledgment.

That we have known who the Falling Man is all along.

*Additional Reporting by Andrew Chaikivsky.*

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